



Performing Music and Human Rights: A photo essay of doing arts with refugees in Greece

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Abstract: An artistic experience that encourages union, creativity, imagination and empathy can mitigate the impact of war. But, most importantly, it gives a friendly and safe floor for the expression of emotions, a necessity in times of emergency.

Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, among tens of countries, are facing the greed of tyrants who threaten the lives of millions of people. Greece is one of the main routes into the European Union for refugees and migrants mostly from Africa and the Middle East. In 2016, when I arrived in Thessaloniki, Greece, the Balkan route through Idomeni got [closed](#) and Greek authorities began relocating 16,000 people, to processing facilities—refugee camps—in and around Thessaloniki.

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Diavata Refugee Camp, Northern Greece, March 2016 (Photo by Laura María Calderón)

The conditions and uncertainty of the situation build tension between residents who are often unfamiliar with one another. With few opportunities to develop connections, and an environment of suspicion and fear, people feel unsafe in their surroundings. In addition, their loss of homes, homeland, livelihoods and loved ones, combined with continuing inactivity and various protection challenges, results in mental health and coexistence problems.

Bringing together refugees with the host community is vitally important in a situation in which refugees feel (and in the case of those living in camps on the city's outskirts, literally are) marginalised. Additionally, recognising and realising their presence by encouraging their creativity and talents—musical, artistic and practical—benefits them as individuals, the city's community and, in the longer-term, global society. This is a step towards changing hearts and minds, and supporting people to a different understanding and perception of themselves, their world and the way the two interact.

For instance, one of the initial points of this journey started in a shared scenario-performance in Venice and Thessaloniki. In the latter, local musicians from the Symphonic Orchestra of the city and musicians who were living in refugee camps, [performed together](#). They claimed in one voice the recognition and protection of the refugees.



"A Concert For the Refugees", the Thessaloniki State Symphony Orchestra and refugee musicians, Diyar Mehrovi. Concert Hall of Thessaloniki "Megaro Mousiki", Thessaloniki, Greece, June 2016

As a teaching artist, singer and dancer, I know that art performances promote a sense of connectedness with others, by building bridges, in a creative and unique way. Communication, learning, listening and other skills become available through the arts. In fact, it assembles people from diverse backgrounds, who celebrate their common love of music, which ultimately expresses the world of emotions that all humans share.

Therefore, going inside the facilities, and offering a space where children and adults could experience that, has been my prime motivation. Human rights and arts exist only when they become practical. When you live it, freedom and joy may arise and nobody can take it from you.



Music workshop using recycled materials, facilitated by Laura María Calderón, Jahvier Martínez and Matías Gatica. Sinatex Camp, 2017 (Photo by Sylvain Mazas)



Music workshop with women facilitated by Laura María Calderón, Sinatex Camp, 2017

The activities of my music workshops include body percussion, singing, games using rhythm and movement, percussion lessons with recycled materials and breathing exercises. I use the arts to uphold the feeling that people whatever their circumstances do have power. Using that power in innovative ways need not be a

chore, but a pleasure, which benefits and strengthens their power and interaction, promoting social cohesion.

Using creativity encourages imagination, spontaneity and appreciation. These can arise by using not only music but also painting, dancing, etc. I and other volunteers organised a summer camp, to explore different techniques such as masks, face and T-shirt painting, crafts like making play-animals using recycled materials, as well as dance spaces. Consequently, integration and motivation were present.

It is like the splendour of a tree, which becomes possible by giving care to its seed to grow big and strong. Thus, it can bring forth flowers and fruits to give life to itself and other creatures. The following mural represents that. The contribution of each participant, the chosen words and colours, gave life to this mural. The approximately 50 participants wrote words, in their mother tongue, that they wanted to share with their community, words of love and hope. Many of them chose the names of their loved ones, their natal cities in Syria or Iraq, or sentences like 'Islam is the religion of peace'. They also printed their hands to elaborate the leaves of the trees.



Tree Mural, entrance to Sinatex Refugee Camp, July 2017 (Photo by Samantha Nguyen)



Creation of mural, summer camp, Sinatex Refugee Camp, July 2017. In collaboration with Samantha Nguyen.

Another aim of this journey has been to engage locals and refugees in a meaningful, practical activity. In Giannitsa, a town close to Thessaloniki, we were invited to elaborate a three-month programme that was supposed to end with a performance in the main square of the town. The performance was affected by the first official weekend of COVID-19 lockdown. However, the three-month preparation was done, culminating with amusement, as well as new friendships. Arts foster what a community can be, a place that recognises and aims to connect with each individual and imagines itself via the very process of artistic creation.



Music workshop, facilitated by Laura Maria Calderon and Violetta Mitsogianni. Εκπαιδευτική Καινοτομία - Educational Innovation, Giannitsa, Greece, January 2020 (Photo by Maria Kiouzeppi)



Percussion workshop using recycled materials, facilitated by Laura María Calderón and Violetta Mitsogianni. Giannitsa, February 2020 (Photo by Evagelia Tachtatzi)

In this dreamy community, children, especially babies, are highly guarded and protected by the environment and the people that surround them. Attention focuses

The arts and human rights in practice: The Lullaby Project

in particular on strengthening the bond between parent and child, maternal health, child development and self-empowerment.

I sit with the mother, to talk about their dreams for the baby, their feelings, stories or moments of remembrance—from this information we write together the lyrics. Afterwards, I play Kalimba, an instrument from Zimbabwe, and I sing, to guide her to create the basic melody of the song, or we work in a melody that she has already. Another day, I meet other musicians in a studio and we work on the song, adding new instruments, voices and getting a professional record of a unique and personal song for her and the baby.

Before each one-to-one session, we organise an opening workshop where they meet me, we play body percussion, sing together and do different activities to meet each other, creating an artistic motherhood community. And when the songs are finished, we meet again all together in a closure workshop to listen to the songs, sing and thank them for allowing us to bring something musically new into their lives.



Lullaby opening workshop facilitated by Laura María Calderón, PolyKastro, Greece, February 2022
(Photo by Balqees Jabari)



Lullaby closure workshop, facilitated by Laura Laura Maria Calderón and Silvia La Rocca, Naples, Italy, April 2019

We have composed almost 30y songs with mothers living in Greece and Italy, from Afghanistan, Syria, Eritrea, Cameroon, Senegal and Sri Lanka, among others, and in the languages that the mothers choose, including Farsi, Chinese, Arabic, Sinhalese, French, Italian, Spanish and English. Also, we have added instruments such as oud, flutes, piano, guitar, charango and kalimba.



Lullaby session facilitated by Laura María Calderón, Irida Women Center, Thessaloniki, Greece, November 2021.
Balqees Jabari (our assistant and translator), Semira and Karim.



Lullaby session with Susanne, facilitated by Laura María Calderón and Violetta Mitsogianni, Open Cultural Center, Polykastro, Greece, February 2022

It is worth remembering what [Herbert Marcuse](#) stated:

Inasmuch as art preserves, with the promise of happiness, the memory of the goal that failed, it can enter, as a 'regulative ideal,' the desperate struggle for changing the world. Against all fetishism of the productive forces, against the continued enslavement of individuals by the objective conditions (which remain those of domination), art represents the ultimate goal of all revolutions: the freedom and happiness of the individual.



Diavata Refugee Camp, 2016 (Photo by Omar Monroy)

My work is still active in Greece through *Musicians For Human Rights*. For more information or if you would like to create your song or support us, you can contact us at www.musiciansforhumanrights.org and www.createyourlullaby.com.